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ABSTRACT

In 1993, two surveys were conducted to determine community perceptions of Hudson County Community College (HCCC) in New Jersey. During January and February 1993, 591 questionnaires regarding HCCC's mission were sent to representatives of business and industry, education, government, community groups and agencies, health and human service organizations, law, insurance, and real estate. In summer 1993, a survey was conducted of the employers of 43 HCCC graduates who had previously given permission for their employers to be contacted. Employers were asked about their satisfaction with the graduates' preparation and their suggestions for strengthening HCCC's programs. Study findings, based on a 25% response rate from the community survey and a 79% response rate to the employer survey, included the following: (1) community respondents felt that the most important HCCC missions were to provide programs preparing students for employment; access through low tuition; programs for transfer into academic and occupation programs; access through financial aid; career planning and placement services; access through support for special needs students; general education in a comprehensive curriculum; career retraining for the unemployed or underemployed; and for the development of a centralized campus; (2) asked to comment about HCCC, community respondents mentioned the need for curricular expansion; English as a Second Language, transfer, and basic skills education; the need for public relations; recent positive leadership; general praise for services; and the importance of having a centralized campus and providing for parking, security, and transportation; and (3) 100% of the employer respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the preparation of their HCCC-educated employees. (KP)

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HUDSON COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Planning and Institutional Research
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COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF HUDSON COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Special Report 93.02
October 1993

Eleanor FUJITA

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Executive Summary

This paper was prepared for presentation as part of the staff development seminar series during the Fall of 1993; it was presented on October 20, 1993 by Eleanor Fujita. The paper presents the community's perceptions of the college as interpreted from responses (1) to the survey carried out in January 1993 regarding the mission of the college and (2) to the survey carried out in the summer of 1993 of employers of responding graduates of the classes of 1986, 1988, 1990, 1991, and 1992.

Community representatives surveyed responded that it was most important for the college to provide

- programs preparing students for employment
- access through low tuition
- programs for transfer into academic programs
- programs for transfer into occupation programs
- access through financial aid
- career planning and placement services
- access through support for special needs students
- general education in a comprehensive curriculum
- career retraining for the unemployed or underemployed
- for the development of a centralized campus

When given the opportunity to comment about the college, community representatives mentioned the following topics:

- educational programs (need for expansion of curriculum, importance of occupational, ESL, transfer, and basic skills education)
- image of the college (importance of direction and focus, need for public relations, recent positive leadership)
- praise and criticism of college programs and services (general praise for services, pleased that opinions sought, constructive criticism)
- students and/or other clients (access, diversity, special groups as returning women)
- facilities (centralized campus, parking, security, transportation, and a cohesion of services; "I would love to eventually see HCCC have a 'home' of its own. It's time!")

The response rate of the employers surveyed was quite high: 34 of 43 or 79% responded. Every one of them responded that they were either "satisfied" or "very satisfied" "with the preparation of these HCCC-educated employees for their positions."

The positive responses from the community suggest that HCCC has a high level of community support. Many do, and all want, to take pride in their community college. They see the college as on the move, going in the right direction, and a place with a future.

COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF HUDSON COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

We have two sources of information as to how the community regards the College: the first includes the responses from the survey of the community we carried out for the review of the mission statement, and the second includes the responses from the survey we carried out of employers of the graduates of the classes of 1986, 1988, 1990, 1991, and 1992. The respondents contributed their opinions about the college, and it is the purpose of this presentation to share the results of a review of those comments with you.

The Mission Survey

During January and February 1993, 591 questionnaires regarding HCCC's mission were sent to representatives from six major groups in the county: business and industry; education; government; community groups and agencies; health and human service organizations; and law, insurance, and real estate. Eighteen questionnaires were either not delivered or were returned with empty envelopes; in all 141 of 575 (25 percent) responded. (Further details about the sampling, research methodology, and responses are included enclosed in Special Report 92.06 of the Planning and Research Office and in two related reports: 92.05 and 92.07, all February 1993.)

Most of the items on the questionnaire forced the respondents to limit their responses to pre-conceived statements, but in two items we encouraged the community representatives to give us their opinions freely. The first encouraged them to add additional functions, programs and services which they believed the college should offer, and the second encouraged open responses: ***"We would appreciate any comments you might have about Hudson County Community College. Thank you."*** There were 15 suggestions made in response to the first item, and 52 persons (37 percent) responded to the final item. This report first summarizes the responses to the close-ended questions and then presents the findings from an analysis of the contributed comments.

Responses to Close-Ended Items

Of the 33 functions, programs, and services listed, the community representatives rated the following ten as the most important for HCCC to offer; they are listed in descending order with the one considered most important first: (1) programs preparing students for employment, (2) access through low tuition, (3) programs for transfer into academic programs, (4) programs for transfer into occupational programs, (5) access through financial aid, (6) career planning and placement services, (7) access through supports for special needs students, (8) provision of general education in a comprehensive curriculum, (9) career retraining for the unemployed or underemployed, and (10) the development of a centralized campus.

And, of the 33 functions, programs, and services, those still rated as "important" but given the lowest ratings included: (1) intercollegiate athletic teams, (2) bilingual instruction, (3) access regardless of educational background, and (4) community civic workshops.

Responses to Open-Ended Items

As I examined the contributed comments, I first simply tried to identify the topics they were covering, and after refining my lists of the issues, I concluded that they could be gathered under five broad topics which I labelled: college facilities, educational programs; students/clients; college image; and praise and criticism. These labels will be explained below. In order of mention, educational programs were mentioned most often, followed by image; praise and criticism; students/clients; and facilities.

Beginning with the one least mentioned, I will explain the topics using representative statements from the responses. Please remember, as I go along, that these responses were offered last January, and perceptions since then have probably already been altered.

Facilities. Under the topic "Facilities" I have grouped the comments about the following issues: the importance of having a centralized campus and providing for parking, security, and transportation. The need for a central campus was mentioned seven times, transportation twice, and parking and security each once. Examples of the comments went as follows: "Centralize on one campus and provide adequate, safe parking," and "Develop an office liaison with the public high schools in the city and county to facilitate students' transportation to college."

But the theme running through these comments did not seem to dwell on the practicality of a centralized campus as much as a need for cohesion of the college in the way it presents itself. The underlying thought seemed to be that we lacked the cohesion which should represent a college: "A central location [is needed] to create a college atmosphere," "I feel the development of a centralized campus will greatly enhance the appeal of HCCC, especially if it could be reached by public transportation," and "I think the 'central' campus is a 'must.' The students need to feel a sense of 'belonging' especially [during] their first year at college. When HCCC is recommended they all say, 'They're all over the place' - It's not like going to college' -- etc. [If there were a central campus] HCCC would be more attractive and probably more cohesive and directed within its internal operations. A feeling of 'we are one' could be better established."

And, finally, mention of a centralized campus was a way of expressing hopefulness for the college, "... I would love to eventually see HCCC have a 'home' of its own. It's time!"

Students/Clients. Under the topic "Students/Clients" I have grouped the comments about the importance of keeping tuition low (mentioned five times), dealing with diversity issues (mentioned twice), and working with special groups (e.g. returning women/mothers), providing team sports, and providing access (each mentioned once). Examples of the comments went as follows: "Provide affordable college education," and "Where does a student get training in automotive Technician, air conditioning, refrigeration, etc, without paying a fortune?" "It should ... give the students a deep insight into inter-racial and inter-cultural conduct. HCCC should encourage strong sports team."

Again, the underlying message of the comments grouped under this topic seemed to be as much about describing the community as about a description of students at the college. For example, when they say "Enable mothers to prepare for the work force after their children are the right age to go to school," they are also saying that there is the need for mothers in this community to go to work, and there are mothers without the academic background to do so. When they say," providing access to an affordable education regardless of ethnic or financial background ... should be a top priority," "I believe that there is a real need for HCCC. Many of our county families are blue collar, low income families. The low cost tuition is needed by these groups who cannot afford private education," or "The second goal should be to provide for an interim education, which would prepare students for a transfer to a four-year college. This would benefit students who are unable to afford the tuition or are unsure of their ability to succeed in a full four-year program," they are also describing the needs of the residents.

The suggestion is that the purpose of a community college is to meet the educational needs of the residents of the county in which it is located, and that this county includes many needy residents who could not pursue higher education unless it is provided at low cost. The suggestion is also that there is a belief in higher education as a vehicle for upward movement in society. Example: "It is critical that HCCC become a vehicle through which county residents (particularly inner-city African American residents) can access educational opportunities." (More will be said later about the need of the county residents for English as a Second Language under the topic of "Educational Programs.")

Praise and Criticism. Under the topic "Praise and Criticism" I have grouped the comments which praised the college and wished us good luck (mentioned fifteen times); acknowledged the survey and thanked us for seeking their opinions (mentioned eight times); or criticized or offered advice (mentioned five times).

Examples of praise: "HCCC provides a wonderful alternative for our kids," "It [HCCC] is an excellent institution," "I have great esteem for the work of HCCC." "There's an extraordinary need for the college to expand. Good luck!" Acknowledging the survey: "Great effort with this questionnaire ... Thank you for sending me this survey," "This needs assessment could be a useful tool for the Community College if it results in a 'Mission Statement' that truly reflects the broad directions of the school and if the assessment results in strategic planning with goals and objectives," "Good survey," "I think you are proceeding in the right direction; to survey the community's expectations of a county college ... HCCC can find its mission supplementing and complementing the present services, thus becoming the best county college in the state. More power to you!"

And examples of criticism or advice: "The graduates interviewed consistently showed a lack of depth. College should provide classes via local cable TV ...," "Students who plan to enter a four year college should take liberal arts courses at HCCC and not a host of upper level type or occupational type courses," "... some students who have been accepted and are attending don't always get the proper guidance and help in choosing courses, etc. otherwise, I have only heard good things," or "Periodically publish a map showing all the community college locations and listing the services available at each site."

The message in these comments seems to reflect a great deal of good will for the college. Further, positive feelings about the college seem to have been generated simply because we were perceived to have included their opinions in our planning. And the criticism (and statements mentioned below about the college's image) and advice seems to have been offered only for the benefit of the college and not to aim blame.

College Image. Under the topic "College Image" I have grouped the comments about the perceived sense of direction and focus (mentioned sixteen times), image, public relations, or involvement with politics (mentioned twelve times), or presidential leadership (mentioned three times).

Examples of the comments on direction and focus went as follows: "I think you are proceeding in the right direction ... I believe Hudson County has a commitment to higher education in its colleges and the opportunities provided," "I believe HCCC has come a long way ...," "Be focused: [don't try to be] everything to everyone," or "Do not try to serve the broad range of areas other colleges offer until your primary goal is achieved." On image, "Public relations [is needed] to improve image of the college," or "We need to get the message about the college's programs to the community, especially to the high school seniors." Regarding current presidential leadership, "President Glen Gabert's leadership bodes well for the County and HCCC."

The message was hopeful, but cautionary. The responses were perhaps reminding us that as a college, we have not been seen as focused, we have been perceived as too involved in politics, our image has been poor, and leadership has been in question. Note that most of the comments, while upbeat, were advisory: "Be focused: [don't try to be] everything to everyone. Encourage truly community people to be on the board -- limit politics, politicians, and narrow agendas," "Avoid duplicating services and do less, but do it well," "Keep it a college -- not a vehicle for county politics," "HCCC's image needs an overhaul," "Happy to see an educator rather than a political appointee in charge."

The hopefulness can be seen in such comments as, "I think you are moving in the right direction with your new initiatives. More young people ... need to be made aware of the opportunity to attend HCCC. It is an excellent institution that can benefit many of the city's and county's residents," "I have always thought, despite political corruption, that HCCC has an unusually high number of professionals who seem to care about its/their role in the county," and "I have great esteem for the work of HCCC. I know the rough years the college has been through, but I think under the leadership of the new president, Glen Gabert, the college will flourish." New leadership symbolizes new directions, and in their minds a good direction.

Educational Programs. Under the topic "Educational Programs" I have grouped the comments about the importance of expanding our curriculum (mentioned six times); and of offering programs preparing students for their first career, for promotion, or for filling needed positions (mentioned twelve times); for learning English (mentioned eleven times); for transfer to four-year programs (mentioned seven times); or for entering college courses (basic skills) (mentioned twice).

Examples of the comments on the need to expand the curriculum included: "it [HCCC] needs to expand its course offerings, to meet the needs of a wide sector of the community" and "they [HCCC] should develop comprehensive courses." On preparation for employment: "First priority, should be for the student --preparing them with the skills they need to obtain employment... Train on newest equipment and keep updating...; this provides skills for employment," "Specialize in pumping out quality graduates that are prepared for the real world. The Hudson County business culture is a tough one, 'Only the Strong Survive'" and "offer language/pronunciation courses so that 'educated' employees may be considered promotable." On learning English: "English as a Second Language programs are vital to the college's role in the multicultural society of Hudson County." On transfer preparation: "Provide students with a broad based rigorous curriculum to ensure students academic success in a four year college." And on developmental education: "Provide ... remedial work."

But while most responses on a topic were in agreement, this was not true concerning offering bilingual education or developmental education. While some advocated for bilingual education ("Require a reading list that gives students the opportunity to excel at their own location and in languages they know," and "it [HCCC] (including Bilingual Educational Program) needs to expand its course offerings."), others advocated against courses in languages other than English ("Foreign students should be taught English as a Second Language, but I don't agree that courses should be taught in foreign languages to accommodate them," "English is the primary language in the U.S. and students should learn the language of the country they live in, they wish to be educated in, and be employed in," and "Bilingual education at the college-level is not necessary. The students should learn English and then attend classes. [Bilingual education adds] more expanse to the school."

And similarly, though not as vehemently, one advocated for developmental studies ("Provide ... remedial work"), and another against ("a community college should not be involved in GED or remedial reading, writing, and math programs. This should and must be done at the local high school level").

The message that seemed to come through from the "Educational Program" comments was that the community wanted us to be a comprehensive educational institution, to do it well, and to focus on the educational mission (and not dilute it by becoming a social agency: "Please keep in mind that the primary function of any educational institution should be education! The social, economic, civic, and athletic issues in solving problems should be left in the hands of those primarily involved in those areas. Put your emphasis on education and not on solving the problems of the community, county, state, country or world. Prepare your people with the every day educational needs and let other agencies take care of the social and other issues."). They seem clear about the place of the AAS, AS, and AA degree programs, certificate programs, and ESL. There is confusion as to the need for developmental studies in a college, and particularly for bilingual courses.

Earlier, under "Image" we found comments that suggested that we alert residents to the offerings of the college and put a shine to our image. The confusion regarding offering developmental studies and bilingual courses may suggest that we need to help educate the community about the need for such studies and the nature of the courses -- it appears that respondents thought students missed opportunities for these studies in their public elementary and high school education and perhaps forgot that much of the need for these courses at HCCC are by adult students who may never have gone through our public education system.

Respondent Groups. In this activity we surveyed specific community group representatives, and it is interesting to observe differences among the responses from the various groups. It should be noted that these findings are subject to some arbitrariness since one person might have commented about several topics or about more than one issue in one topic. Also, my comments here about the groups is brief; an analysis of the responses by group membership remains to be done.

Comments from the business community leaned toward "Image" and then toward "Educational Programs," and -- although the numbers were very low (2) the law, insurance and real estate community comments centered on the same topics. Comments from the educational and the health and human service communities tended first toward "Praise and Criticism" and then toward "Educational Programs." Comments from government officials tended first toward "Student/Clients" and then toward "Educational Programs," and comments from community agency representatives tended first toward "Image" and then "Praise and Criticism.

The Employer Survey

The recent graduates (classes of 1991 and 1992) were surveyed one year after graduation (in the fall of 1992 and 1992 respectively, and former graduates (classes of 1986, 1988 and 1990) were surveyed in the fall of 1992. One of the items requested their permission to also survey their employers in regard to their educational preparation for their work. Forty-three graduates gave such permission, and their employers were surveyed during the summer of 1993. Nearly four-fifths (79%) or 34 of 43 employers responded.

Although the report of findings from that survey is just now being prepared, I thought I would share some preliminary findings. All 34 responded that they were either "satisfied" or "very satisfied" "with the preparation of these HCCC-educated employees for their positions."

As with the mission survey, this questionnaire had an open-ended item; it read, *If you have any other observations which would assist us in strengthening our programs, please comment here.* Nine of the employers responded to this item. Three spoke of the exemplary work of the graduates. Seven references were made to the training of the graduates: two suggested that our programs should include certain knowledge specific to the field, one noted that the student was well-trained in the field, and three mentioned the importance of high professional standards.

Conclusion

What conclusions can we draw from all of these community responses to our several surveys? I have formulated a few questions and attempted to let the community responses offer answers as a way of concluding what the community perceptions of HCCC are. My questions, and the answers I sensed, are these:

What do community members believe is the mission of a community college? From the responses, it appears that Hudson County community representatives accept the traditional concepts of a community college: that it should provide educational career and transfer education, that it should provide access through low tuition, that it should provide for training for employment, that it should provide a means for upward mobility for residents, and that it should be responsible to the particular community in which it is located.

They feel that the educational mission should be its focus. But in some areas, as with developmental education and bilingual education, they are less sure; they appear to find these functions as either overlapping with the services of other levels of education or as unproductive.

What do these community members believe is distinct about Hudson County? They describe students who are returning women, living in the inner-city, from blue-collar families, in need of employment and training and retraining for employment, and new to this country and linguistically diverse. And while they want HCCC to focus on its educational mission, they want it to be responsive to this distinctive community.

Finally, *what do they want for HCCC?* Many do, and all want, to take pride in their community college. They see the college as on the move, going in the right direction, and a place with a future.

The words of one respondent to the mission survey best summarizes the advice offered in these completed questionnaires: "Periodically publish a map showing all the community college locations and listing the services available at each site." Much as our accreditation activities force us to take stock of what it is we are about, this respondent asks that we do much the same. For, in order to "periodically publish a map showing all the community college locations and listing the services available at each site" we must be cognizant of what it is we are about, systemically inventory our offerings, and publish our services. In a nutshell, this is what the community is asking us at HCCC to do; they seem to be saying, "we are glad you are here, we need the educational services you offer, we like what you are about, and we are with you. So do what you do and do it well, identify your programs, tell us how to use your services, take pride in your work and in the College."

Related Resources

Questionnaires:

Hudson County Community College Mission Project Community Survey (instrument revised from Johnson County College mission questionnaire)

Hudson County Community College Mission Project College Survey (instrument revised from Johnson County College mission questionnaire)

Employer Survey, 1993, Hudson County Community College

Reports:

Mission Survey: Comments from College Community, Special Report 92.05, February 1993, Office of Planning and Institutional Research, Hudson County Community College, Jersey City, NJ.

Mission Survey: Comments from External Community, Special Report 92.06, February 1993, Office of Planning and Institutional Research, Hudson County Community College, Jersey City, NJ.

Mission Survey: Responses from College Community and from External Community, Special Report 92.07, February 1993, Office of Planning and Institutional Research, Hudson County Community College, Jersey City, NJ.

Presentations:

Development of a Mission Statement for a Comprehensive Urban Community College (and a supplemental Argument for Providing Developmental Education as Part of the Comprehensive Urban Community College Mission of Hudson County Community College), presentation at the Symposium on Developing Strategies for Excellence in Urban Education, Jersey City State College, NJ, October 29, 1993.

Making the Most of the Mission Statement Review, presentation at the annual regional meeting of Northeast Association of Institutional Researchers, Lake George, NY, November 8, 1993.

COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF HUDSON COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

CATEGORIES OF RESPONSES FROM MISSION SURVEY

1. FACILITIES
   - centralized campus
   - parking
   - security
   - transportation

2. STUDENTS/CLIENTS
   - low tuition
   - diversity
   - special groups
   - team sports
   - access

3. PRAISE AND CRITICISM
   - praise and well wishes
   - survey
   - constructive criticism

4. COLLEGE IMAGE
   - direction and focus
   - image, public relations, or politics
   - presidential leadership

5. EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS
   - expansion of curriculum
   - training for first career, for promotion, or for filling needed positions
   - English as a Second Language
   - preparation for transfer to four-year programs
   - basic skills

QUESTIONS WHICH MAY BE ANSWERED BY THE SURVEYS

What do community members believe is the mission of a community college?

What do these community members believe is distinct about Hudson County?

What do they want for HCCC?

"Periodically publish a map showing all the community college locations and listing the services available at each site."